



HOW TO STEM LEARNING LOSS AND PROMOTE PROGRESS WITH DIRECT AID TO FAMILIES

October 2020

THE URGENCY TO STOP LEARNING LOSS

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the American education system in ways few educators and policymakers could have imagined. Forced to shutter their doors in the spring, most schools pivoted to some version of remote learning but [were unsuccessful](#) in helping students grow (or even remain on track) academically. Even if the overall education experience, including remote learning, improves for most students through the end of 2020, it will likely do little to recover the learning that was lost. And as most students in the U.S. are currently engaged in either remote or hybrid learning models, the question of whether the improvements schools have made will stem further learning loss remains open.

A summer 2020 [McKinsey & Company](#) analysis modeled three epidemiological scenarios to estimate the impacts of learning loss that began in the spring of 2020 and could continue through the spring of 2021. In the Fall of 2020, most students across the country are living in something akin to McKinsey's second scenario, which predicts "school closures and part-time schedules continu[ing] intermittently through the 2020-21 school year," and no consistent in-school instruction until January 2021. Under this scenario, average *learning loss for all students will amount to about seven months. For Black, Hispanic and low-income students the picture is especially bleak: McKinsey predicts that these groups will lose up to 10, 8, and more than 12 months, respectively.* If this comes to fruition, existing achievement gaps could increase by 15-20%, and high school dropout rates will increase across all demographics.

These academic setbacks have long-term economic consequences. McKinsey also finds that "the average K-12 student in the United States could lose \$61,000 to \$82,000 in lifetime earnings (in constant 2020 dollars), or the equivalent of a year of full-time work, solely as a result of COVID-19." And the impact on the individual snowballs to impact communities, states, and the nation. A study by the [Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development \(OECD\)](#) predicts that school closures as a result of COVID-19 "could ultimately amount to a loss of almost \$14.2 trillion over the next 80 years."

WEALTHIER FAMILIES HAVE MORE RESOURCES TO STEM LEARNING LOSS

In the Spring of 2020, those who could afford it tried to stem learning loss by paying for high quality virtual options when school and district remote learning programs didn't deliver. Whether it's paying for a subscription for an online education provider or paying for a tutor to assist students remotely, supplemental options can help. These options are particularly important for medically vulnerable students, students who live with medically vulnerable adults, and those who feel unsafe interacting with people outside their family during the pandemic.

In the Fall of 2020, families who are willing to venture outside of their homes are leaving districts that aren't offering live instruction. Those who have the means are [enrolling in private schools](#), which are more likely than their district counterparts to be back in session. Others are forming "[pandemic pods](#)," small groups of students led by an adult who oversees remote learning or engages students in an entirely new curriculum right out of someone's home. [Micro schools](#), which were growing in popularity before the pandemic, have also seen an uptick in interest. Some providers offer a [micro school/homeschool hybrid](#), delivering personalized curricula out of student homes, much like a pandemic pod.

Among other things, the pandemic has highlighted the important connection between education and childcare in the U.S. That connection is now broken for millions of families.



While directly addressing education, these innovative solutions also solve a childcare problem. Working parents—even those who can work from home—look to brick-and-mortar schooling as a child-care solution. Remote learning may keep older students engaged and occupied, but they may still require childcare. A pod leader or micro school-teacher acts as a caregiver while parents are at work. And if parents have the luxury of working from home, they won't have the added burden of ensuring that kids are online and engaged.

Working parents of young children are in an especially difficult position. Some children are too young to engage in online learning, forcing parents to decide between their jobs and childcare in this already-difficult economy. And when pre-school aged children have no exposure to early education, [the achievement gap becomes apparent as early as kindergarten](#).

This childcare conundrum has economic implications as well. The [Brookings Institute](#) estimates that “in some regions of the U.S., school and child-care dependent working parents comprise as much as 29% of the workforce.” Even if parents feel safe sending their children to a day-care provider or having a caregiver in the home, not all of them can afford to do so. Schools are an important form of childcare for millions of American families.

Pandemic pods, micro schools, and similar options are education and childcare solutions, but they can come at a steep cost.

According to a [recent report](#), the company Pupil Pod charges families \$100 per hour for a certified teacher. If that cost is split among six families at just four hours a day, five days a week, each family would pay \$340 per week or \$1360 per month. The average American family doesn't have the means to bear such cost, which only covers a half day of schooling and leaves working parents with a childcare gap. Consider [Federal Reserve data](#) finding that 40% of American families can't even afford a \$400 emergency, if necessary. How would families afford supplemental education or childcare? Also consider that families require enough space in their homes to host a teacher and additional “pod” members or classmates, quite possibly while one or more adults works at home.

The pandemic has exacerbated and will continue to exacerbate existing access gaps. The answer is not to prevent parents from doing what they think best for their children. Instead, states should ensure that families across the socio-economic spectrum can access the options they need.

In 2018, average [K-12 per-pupil spending in the United States](#) was \$12,612 per pupil. That figure doesn't capture [large spending differences among states](#): average per-pupil spending in New York was over \$24,000 while Oklahoma spent a little more than \$8,000 per student. But states do have one thing in common: They provide most of the funding that comprises average per-pupil spending (roughly 47%, on average), with local and federal governments making up the balance. ***This means that states are well poised to ensure that families receive the money earmarked for their children when schools can't provide students with the education that fits their needs.***

LEARNING EQUITY AND PROGRESS (LEAP) GRANTS FOR CHILDREN, PRE-K-12

States should immediately allocate grants equivalent to the average state contribution to per-pupil funding to qualifying students. A state agency or not-for-profit entity should jointly manage the grants with parents. Learning Equity and Progress (LEAP) grants should apply to students enrolled in pre-kindergarten through grade 12 who meet income qualifications.



Funding and Allowable Uses

Families could use LEAP Grants for a wide variety of state-sanctioned education, health, and child-care related expenses, including but not limited to:

- Computer hardware and software
- Internet connectivity
- Tutoring or supplemental education services
- In-home education and/or care
- Private school tuition
- special education and education-related telehealth services (including mental and socio-emotional health services)
- approved out-of-school learning experiences

State legislatures may also choose to:

- Use emergency funding, such as CARES funds, to assist qualifying families for at least one full academic year following the (state-defined) resolution of the Covid-19 pandemic; or
- Enact legislation that redirects funds from the state funding formula to LEAP grants.
- The full amount of a LEAP grant under any of the eligibility models below should be at least 75% of the state's average per pupil contribution to the funding formula.

Student/Family Eligibility

States should consider one or more of the models below to determine who is eligible for what amount of LEAP funding. These models could also be combined.

MODEL ONE: Focus on students who qualify for free- and reduced-price lunch regardless of the schools in which they were enrolled in 2019/20 or are currently enrolled.

- A child must be eligible to enroll in pre-kindergarten (pre-K) or currently enrolled in any grade pre-K through 12.
- A child/family must be eligible for free- and-reduced-price lunch (FRLP) as of the 2019-20 school year or show proof of unemployment/employment furlough in calendar year 2020.

Under this model, states may consider evenly distributing the LEAP Grants among qualifying students and may choose to more heavily weight LEAP funding for qualifying students who also have IEP/504 plans.

MODEL TWO: Focus on students enrolled in a public school district in the 2019-20 school year.

- A child must be eligible to enroll in pre-kindergarten (pre-k) or currently enrolled in any grade pre-K through 12
- Families are eligible regardless of income, but grants could be distributed on a sliding scale, based on income. For example:
 - Families making less than \$100,000 per year could be eligible for the full amount of the LEAP Grant.
 - Families making \$100-200,000 per year could be eligible for 50% of the full amount of the LEAP Grant.
 - Families making above \$200,000 per year could be eligible for 25% of the full amount of the LEAP Grant.
- Students with special educational needs (defined as an IEP or 504 plan) should receive the full amount of the grant (or more, according to "weight"), regardless of income.



MODEL THREE: Focus on all students in a state (public district, public charter, private, and homeschool).

- A child must be eligible to enroll in pre-kindergarten (pre-K) or currently enrolled in any grade pre-K through 12.
- Families are eligible regardless of income, but grants could be distributed on a sliding scale, based on income. For example:
 - Families making less than \$100,000 per year could be eligible for the full amount of the LEAP Grant.
 - Families making \$100-200,000 per year could be eligible for 50% of the full amount of the LEAP Grant.
 - Families making above \$200,000 per year could be eligible for 25% of the full amount of the LEAP Grant.
- Students with special educational needs (defined as an IEP or 504 plan) should receive the full amount of the grant (or more, according to “weight”), regardless of income.

Special Considerations for Pre-Kindergarten

- States that currently fund pre-kindergarten may determine the amount of the pre-K LEAP grant based on the average state per-pupil allocation for pre-kindergarten students.
- States that do not provide publicly funded pre-kindergarten may allocate the same amount to qualifying pre-kindergartners as to qualifying students in grades 1-12.
- Where they don’t exist, states should enact tax-credits for all families of pre-school aged children who provide proof of enrollment in a preschool or educative care setting.

Focus on Outcomes

LEAP Grants represent a substantial investment, and states should create mechanisms to assess the extent to which direct payments to families ameliorate learning gaps now and in the future.

Grant recipients should:

- Participate in a state-funded, nationally norm referenced assessment every year they receive a grant (grades 3-12).

States should contract with a third party to do the following:

- Aggregate norm-referenced test score data;
- Analyze the number of IEP classifications for students who received LEAP grants;
- Analyze LEAP spending by allowable expense/expense category;
- Publish an annual report on LEAP grants describing data collected and LEAP recipient outcomes compared to a national norm.

DIRECT RELIEF CAN’T WAIT

As of Fall 2020, millions of parents and students are still waiting for a clear picture of what school will look like for the rest of the year. But they shouldn’t have to wait. Without assistance, low-and middle-income parents will not have the ability to stem pandemic-related learning losses by accessing private schools, in-home learning supports, supplemental services, child-care, and other services. Unchecked, learning loss will affect more than individual students and families; it will have negative social and economic consequences for decades to come. States have the power to ameliorate or even stop learning loss, and the time to act is now. LEAP grants are a short-term solution that can produce long-term benefits, and families and states may wish to move forward with a flexible grant model even after the pandemic has passed.